

NGO Criticizes Russian Presence at Charlie Hebdo March in Paris

By [Anna Dolgov](#)

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People hold panels to create the eyes of late Charlie Hebdo editor Stephane Charbonnier, known as "Charb", as hundreds of thousands of French citizens take part in a solidarity march (Marche Republicaine) in the streets of Paris on Jan. 11, 2015.

Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders has condemned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and other "predators of press freedom" who attended a march in Paris to commemorate the victims of the Charlie Hebdo attack.

The Paris-based watchdog said it was "outraged by the presence of officials from countries that restrict freedom of information" among the million-strong crowd that marched Sunday in homage to the victims of last week's mass shooting at France's satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo.

"On what grounds are representatives of regimes that are predators of press freedom coming to Paris to pay tribute to Charlie Hebdo, a publication that has always defended the most

radical concept of freedom of expression?" the statement said Sunday.

Russia, which sent Lavrov to the Sunday rally, ranked just 148th out of 180 countries on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index last year, and at least 32 of the 56 journalists killed in Russia in connection with their work since 1992 were murdered, according to figures by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

"It would be unacceptable if representatives of countries that silence journalists were to take advantage of the current outpouring of emotion to try to improve their international image and then continue their repressive policies when they return home," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire said in the statement.

Other offenders named by Reporters Without Borders were Egypt, which ranked 159th in the press freedom index, Turkey, which ranked 154th, and United Arab Emirates, which ranked 118th — all of which sent officials to the Paris march.

"We must not let predators of press freedom spit on the graves of Charlie Hebdo," Deloire said in his statement.

Elsewhere, the Kremlin-backed head of Chechnya, a predominantly Muslim region in southern Russia, lashed out Friday at independent radio station Ekho Moskvyy for its "provocative" publications that he said insulted "the Muslims of Russia and of the whole world."

While referring to the French shooting as "tragic," Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov said editor Alexei Venediktov had turned Ekho Moskvyy "into the main anti-Islam mouthpiece," and threatened that others could hold him to account for his actions.

Venediktov responded on the radio station's website by saying he took "Kadyrov's threat seriously" and intended to ask law enforcement agencies to look into the matter.

About 40 world leaders linked arms in Paris on Sunday during the massive rally, including French President Francois Hollande, British Prime Minister David Cameron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Contact the author at newsreporter@imedi.ru

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